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THE ROUND TABLE

PUSHING OUT THE CIRCUMFERENCE¹

When I picked up the newspaper the other morning, I turned first to an account of the decision of the school authorities to drop German from the high school, after a stormy protest from the enraged citizenry. I had heard all of the conversations rehearsed by excited auditors and had talked it over volubly with the teachers. I knew all about it. Yet it was the first article I read in the paper.

I read next an article on the Liberty Loan banquet. One of my small pupils, who had sold a remarkable number of bonds, was honored by this gathering, and the paper related it. The article contained no surprises, for I had been told of the luncheon in detail by some of the workers and had bought one of the bonds which swelled Fred's total.

Why did I do it? Why does everyone else do the same, read first what he already knows? Because that is human nature. Nothing is so absorbingly interesting as our own doings and our own people. When we are in school we read the football stories; when we teach we take pedagogical journals; when we are in business we read the business stories in the *Saturday Evening Post*. You have just stopped taking the *Youth's Companion*; I have just begun to take the *English Journal*. I am the center of my own circle; each one of you is the center of yours. That is human, and there is nothing to object to in it. All the education in the world will not change it.

But where is the circumference? If it is so close to the center that they cannot be told apart, you have a pretty small circle, a narrow horizon, and you are called "narrow-minded" and "provincial." We are living in our particular town in our particular state in the year 1918, and we are interested in our families and our school friends. We ought to be; we cannot be too much interested in the people who are close to us. We read about them in the paper and we read books and magazines which remind us of them. All well and good. I would not change it. But you must not stop there. Your circumference is too near the center. Push out that circumference until it encircles other people than your friends, other places than home, other times than today. After you have read

¹The author of this bright little essay on the reading of books explains that this is what she says somewhat less formally to her classes.—EDITOR.

Penrod read *Tom Sawyer*; after you have read *Tom Sawyer* read *David Copperfield*. You can push out your circumference quickly and roundly by reading. Open the covers of the right books and you can find any people you choose, any country or any time you desire.

First of all, let us think of the people whom you have come to know by reading. Some of you, of course, are able more easily to see these book persons as real and substantial, but all of you recognize and remember their individual traits, just as you come to know the special qualities of your friends and, alas, your teachers. Tom Sawyer is as living as most of your boy friends, more living than most of your teachers. I take peculiar pleasure in referring frequently in class to the pranks of Tom and Huckleberry Finn, just to see the smile that spreads over the faces when the boys whitewash the fence, cure their warts, win Bibles at Sunday school, and attend their own funeral. He is real, Tom Sawyer, to everyone of you and he has given you fun. Penrod and Willie Baxter, new in the world of fiction, are known to you too. More than one of you has laughed to me over Willie's imitation of Sidney Carton, "He loved as I love, getting no return"; "It is a far nobler thing that I do." Moreover, you enjoyed it so much because you knew the original, Sidney Carton himself. He has identity for you and you will never forget him.

Nor will you forget Shylock, the cruel, pathetic old Jew, nor the noble Brutus, nor Gratiano of the "skipping spirit." No matter how long you live or how much else you forget, a mention of Hawkeye will remind you of the scout, our old friend of Freshman days. Magua too will stay with you, that inexpressible villain. And speaking of villains, the haughty Templar will not fade from your memories very quickly. Long after you have forgotten how to extract cube root or find the blood pressure of an artery, the name of Rebecca or of Roderick Dhu will arouse definite recollections. How many of you ever heard of Robinson Crusoe, Robin Hood, Richard of the Lion's Heart? Unanimous? Of course. It couldn't be different.

Dickens maintains his perennial interest because of the perpetual freshness of his people. In these moving-picture days the stories of Dickens seem rather slow, but his characters still entertain and delight us. When I handed you one day a picture of a group of Dickens folk, those of you who were fortunate enough to have read about them elbowed one another out of the way in your eagerness to find Mr. Micawber, little Nell, Jerry Cruncher, Sary Gamp, Dick Swiveler, Uriah Heep, and Mr. Pickwick.

A number of you have told me that you would like to travel, to see the rest of the world. "Why?" I have often asked you. "Don't you like it here?" "It is always the same," you tell me. Then travel; travel today and tomorrow and always, and travel wherever you please. Not all of you can have train travel; none of you can have it just when you wish; but all of you can travel right at home, in a chair, with a book. Thus entraining, you can do more than travel in space, go you never so far: you can travel in time. No train can do that for you; a book transports you without the slightest trouble. Now I have never been in India, in Alaska, in the mountains, in the desert, in Jerusalem; I have never seen a chariot race, the eruption of a volcano, a chain gang, the flood of a river, a buried city in the jungle; I have never escaped from a prison camp in Germany by flying in an airship over the battle lines. That is, in the flesh. I doubt, however, if I could receive more definite impressions of these experiences and places were they present to my senses than I have received from books. Some of these books were *The Jungle Book*, *The Call of the Wild*, *Ramona*, *The Light That Failed*, *Ben Hur*, *The Last Days of Pompeii*, *Les Misérables*, *The Mill on the Floss*. When I was traveling abroad I found the greatest pleasure in visiting places already familiar to me through stories. Millions of tourists have gone to Verona because Juliet lived there and they could see her tomb. Lived *there*? Oh no, but in Shakespeare's play; and Shakespeare, even, had never been in Verona.

Let us go over our high-school reading list and see how far and how widely we have journeyed away from our home town in 1918. *The Last of the Mohicans* took us to New York state before the Revolution, when the French and the English were disputing the possession of the northern woods and the Indians were played off against one another. Then we went to romantic mediaeval England, at the time of the Crusades, when the outlaws roamed Sherwood Forest, when the cruel Templars were overthrown, when brave knights fought for fair damsels and were imprisoned in grim dungeons. Through *The Merchant of Venice* we were present when the magnificent merchants of the Italian Renaissance persecuted the hated Jews and disaster was averted by the lady with the golden hair. Next we lived with *Silas Marner* in rural England a hundred years ago, with its narrowness, its simplicity, and its sorrows. In *The Lady of the Lake* we saw the Highlands of Scotland in the sixteenth century, where desperate bandits fought with the brave king. *Julius Caesar* took us to Rome centuries ago and showed us how the issues of our own day were fought out between great men. *The Idylls of the*

King, of dateless time, the undying days of chivalry and faith, enriched our memories with Lancelot and Galahad. *The Tale of Two Cities* brought us into the heart of the French Revolution, and we stormed the Bastille, witnessed the ferocity of the guillotine, and shuddered at the ceaseless knitting. Think of the travels in time and space that *Macbeth*, *Lord Clive*, *Walden*, *Joan of Arc*, *Kenilworth*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *The Spectator Papers*, have given you. The circumference has been enlarged not inconsiderably.

I read first, as I told you, about school and Fred. Quite naturally. There was nothing to object to in that. But should I have stopped there? No, I read about politics and the war, about people I had never seen, and about places I had never been. Within in the compass of a few minutes, my circle, with my chair as its center, stretched north to Canada, south to Brazil, east to Flanders, west to Japan. Reading does that for all of you. You cannot help being the center of the circle, but push out the circumference.

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A PEARL¹

In the deep sea there lies a pearl;
In the woodland a violet blue,
On the mountain high, a rose,
And in my heart—you.

To the diver the sea gives up its pearl;
At my touch the violet bends its head;
O'er the mount the rose leaves scattered lie,
And you—are dead.

Yet in the deep more pearls shall glisten,
Violets nod in springtime's dew;
And the rose leaves breathe again, dear,
Memories of you.

L. HERMINIA ELLIS

¹Miss Alice S. Botkin, Central High School, Washington, D.C., says that this was a spontaneous, unrequired composition inspired by an old Spanish song of which the pupil remembered but a single line. Printed without alteration.